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The Odnodvortsy and the Russian Nobility¹

THOMAS ESPER

HISTORIANS frequently refer to the social classes of 18th-century Russia as if they represented sharply defined divisions of society, each one possessing its own peculiar rights, privileges and obligations. In practice that division was not so clear-cut, for, as in even rigidly structured societies, there existed a measure of social mobility. Peter the Great's Table of Ranks was the primary method by which 18th-century Russians could move from non-noble status into the ranks of the gentry by attaining the rank of staff or junior officer (*oberofitser*). The Table of Ranks, however, accounts only for an upward social movement and not for noblemen who lost their status. There was a class of people, the *odnodvortsy*, who occupied an anomalous position between the peasantry and the nobility in Russian society during the 18th century, and to a lesser extent during the first part of the 19th century; in studying that group we can see how both an upward and a downward social movement occurred.

In past studies of the *odnodvortsy*, scholars have failed to appreciate the role of that class as a reservoir of future noblemen and as a refuge for nobles who lost their gentry status. Indeed, some historians have refused to assign significance to the frequent claims of noble origins by *odnodvortsy*. One reason for this is the scanty data with which the historian must work; another is, perhaps, an inclination to think of the Russian gentry as they have been depicted in literature—owning estates and serfs. It is evident, however, that there were numerous noblemen who had extremely few peasants and not much land. It was from such impoverished nobles that the *odnodvortsy* class, to a considerable extent, was originally formed.

In an article on the *odnodvortsy* published in 1850,² Ya. Solov'yov found that they originated with the lowest ranks of the old gentry militia, the *deti boyarskiye*, as well as with various types of the old standing forces, the *strel'tsy*, etc. He noted that in the 16th and 17th centuries the southern frontier of Russia was guarded by a special force, the nobles of which were granted land. Likewise, because of the difficulty in providing for their support, non-nobles in the fron-

¹ This study was supported in part by a grant from the Russian Research Center at Harvard University.

² Ya. Solov'yov, 'Ob odnodvortsakh' (*Otechestvennyye zapiski*, LXIX, Moscow, 1850, pp. 81–100).

tier guard were sometimes given land. Such grants, he said, served both for compensation and for settlement. Solov'yov further noted that in the awarding of such land to *deti boyarskiye*, Cossacks and soldiers, no distinction was made according to rank. He concluded that the predecessors of the *odnodvortsy*, originally of various classes, gradually formed one class in which each was equal in his right to own a landed estate. Under those conditions they formed, during Peter the Great's reign, a special non-noble class.

G. Germanov³ was not so liberal in recognising the noble origin of some *odnodvortsy* in the *guberniya* of Voronezh. The original population of that area, he said, was made up of people who rendered service in garrisons and in the field. During the reign of Peter they acquired the name *odnodvortsy*, but by the end of the 18th century those features that distinguished them from the state peasants had already disappeared.

N. Pavlov-Sil'vansky likewise traced the *odnodvortsy* to former servicemen on the southern frontier. He suggested a convincing explanation for their poverty. 'There was much free land, but not enough hands to work it, and the insignificance of the estates was caused by the lack of peasants. Many *pomeshchiki*, not having peasants, had to work the land with their own hands, and they were transformed into *odnodvortsy*.'⁴ When the frontier moved further southward, the *odnodvortsy*, who were unable to perform ordinary service because of poverty, and who were no longer needed for defence, were assigned a position similar to that of state peasants; and when the *dvor* tax was first levied (1679-1681) the *odnodvortsy* had to pay equally with the peasants.⁵ Pavlov-Sil'vansky likewise believed that these servicemen were originally of various classes, including impoverished *deti boyarskiye*.⁶ He used the term *odnodvortsy*, it should be noted, to describe these persons not as a specific class but as owners of small one-family farms. His study did not deal with the 18th century, when the *odnodvortsy* acquired legal status.

The most extensive work on the *odnodvortsy* was done by V. I. Semevsky. Yet while his is the most comprehensive treatment of the subject, he was most interested in their economic position, the distribution of their property, etc. While admitting that they were originally servicemen, some of whom were petty nobles,⁷ he nevertheless regarded their claim to gentry status as an ill-founded

³ G. Germanov, 'Postepennoye rasprostraneniye odnodvorcheskago naseleniya v Voronezhskoy gubernii' (*Zapiski imperatorskago russkago geograficheskago obshchestva*, XII, St Petersburg, 1857, pp. 185-325).

⁴ N. Pavlov-Sil'vansky, *Gosudarevy sluzhilyye lyudi*, St Petersburg, 1898, p. 249.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 251.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

⁷ V. I. Semevsky, *Krest'yane v tsarstvovaniye imperatritsy Tekateriny II*, St Petersburg, 1901, II, p. 722.

pretension.⁸ Semevsky, like other historians, merely assumed that the greatest part of that class was originally composed of non-nobles. We have no data, however, to indicate how many were nobles and how many were not. In the following pages it is necessary to deal with this problem without knowing how many individuals and families moved into and out of the *odnodvortsy* class. We can only be certain that the movement was of considerable size, because this was a major topic in legislation on the *odnodvortsy* (see note 12 below).

I

In its earliest appearances the term *odnodvortsy* was used not as a designation of a special class but as a description of impoverished *deti boyarskiye*, that is, the term referred to petty frontier nobles with only one small farm.⁹ The historians mentioned above admitted that many of these persons formed the original *odnodvortsy* class, but they insisted that non-nobles were more numerous: cavalrymen, musketeers, artillerymen, Cossacks, soldiers of all types in garrison, etc. How many of these supposedly non-nobles were actually *deti boyarskiye* is impossible to determine, although we must assume that some were, because Kotoshikhin mentioned that impoverished *deti boyarskiye* as well as non-nobles were chosen as *reytary*.¹⁰ It appears, therefore, that a very significant number of the original *odnodvortsy* were of petty noble origin, and that it is this fact, together with later developments in the 18th century, that gave rise to the contention of many *odnodvortsy* that they were nobles.

When Peter I introduced the soul tax, the *odnodvortsy* were obliged to pay and the nobles were not. This was a most important instance in definitely separating the two classes. Like the nobles, the *odnodvortsy* had to serve the government in the militia. Thus this class was burdened with the tax obligations of the peasantry and the service obligations of the gentry.¹¹ In return, they enjoyed the right to own land and serfs, as well as to enjoy *pomest'ya* granted for

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 769–70. See also N. M. Druzhinin, *Gosudarstvennyye krest'yane i reforma P. D. Kiseleva*, Moscow/Leningrad, 1946, I, pp. 30–2. Druzhinin has little to say about the *odnodvortsy* and what he has written is taken essentially from Ya. Solov'yov and Semevsky. Since Semevsky's work there has been, as far as the present writer knows, no further research on this subject.

⁹ *Akty Moskovskogo gosudarstva*, Vol. II: *Razryadnyi prikaz Moskovskiy stol'*, ed. N. A. Popov, St Petersburg, 1894, Nos. 62 (1636), 112 (1638), 382 (1649), 387 (1649) and 1131 (1659).

¹⁰ G. Kotoshikhin, *O Rossii v tsarstvovaniye Alekseya Mikhaylovich*, St Petersburg, 1906, p. 131.

¹¹ This dual aspect was recognised as late as 1823 in a law which noted that 'the *odnodvortsy* form a middle estate between the nobles and the peasants, having the right to own estates of the former and the recruit obligations of the latter'. (*Polnoye sobraniye zakonov*, XXXVII, No. 29,476; cited hereafter as *PSZ.*)

militia service, which was for a period of fifteen years. Near the end of the century, when the frontier militia was no longer necessary, they served in the regular forces, as did the state peasants, again for only a fifteen-year period. In all, their position could be envied by many state peasants and even by some of the poorest noblemen, who found their service obligations intolerable; and indeed a number of the latter entered the ranks of the *odnodvortsy* to escape those obligations.

During the 18th century, the ranks of the *odnodvortsy* were expanded by the inclusion of various classes of people.¹² In 1737, for example, some former gunners in the town of Kasimov, whose forefathers had likewise been artillerymen and soldiers, were listed with the *odnodvortsy*, given land, and had to serve in the militia.¹³ In 1749 a large number of persons (3,108) in Tula province were listed with the *odnodvortsy*, because they were not serving in any capacity.¹⁴ Some time later, during the deliberations of the Ulozheniye commission, the same persons objected to being registered as *odnodvortsy*. In their *nakaz* (cahier) they cited a law of 1724 according to which nobles in civil and military service were not to be counted with the *odnodvortsy* and should not be obliged to pay the soul tax. Until 1749, therefore, their forefathers did not serve as *odnodvortsy* and were not listed as such, and until that year, they maintained, they enjoyed the privileges of the gentry. The revision of 1749, however, revealed that a number of them remained idly at home, although they were fit for service or for school. They therefore complained that they were registered, with some exceptions, with the *odnodvortsy*, despite the fact that they were nobles, for which they had proof. The government, however, was of the opinion that there were already enough noble families in Tula province.¹⁵

The *odnodvortsy* of the town of Mikhaylov complained in a *nakaz* that they had always been compensated with money and not with land. They served in the voyevodstvo chancellery in Mikhaylov and had been listed for years in the heraldic rolls along with the other gentry; many of their children had reached the rank of junior officer

¹² In the middle of the 18th century there were some half a million male *odnodvortsy* (Semevsky, *op. cit.*, p. 728). Professor Arcadius Kahan of the University of Chicago reckons (in an unpublished statistical table) that there were almost 50,000 noblemen in Russia in 1762-3. Because the Russian empire was expanding (especially with the acquisition of Polish territories), the numbers of both noblemen and *odnodvortsy* were on the increase. It is therefore impossible to determine how many persons moved into and out of the *odnodvortsy* class by comparing such statistical data.

¹³ *PSZ*, X, No. 7,399.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, XIII, No. 9,672.

¹⁵ *Sbornik russkago istoricheskago obshchestva*, CXV (1903) (henceforth cited as *Sbornik*), pp. 31-5. Almost all the *odnodvortsy* were settled in the south of Russia, and in the middle of the 18th century over 90 per cent were in the gubernii of Voronezh and Belgorod (Semevsky, *op. cit.*, p. 728).

in the army. In 1758, nevertheless, they were enrolled with the *odnodvortsy* and had then to pay the soul tax; while they were not in arrears, the obligation was a heavy burden, because they did not have any land.¹⁶

Still another illustration reveals how petty nobles might lose their status through the imperiousness of a powerful aristocrat. In this case the nobles were only threatened, but the attitude of the aristocrat is interesting. Some Siberian nobles had their grievances presented to the Ulozheniye commission by the deputy of the town of Yeniseysk. These nobles complained that they were being discriminated against in that their privileges were not equal to those enjoyed by the nobility of European Russia. Some of them had no land and earned their livelihood in governmental service.¹⁷ Prince Shcherbatov replied to the complaint of what he called the 'so-called' nobles of Siberia and said that except in a few instances those 'so-called' nobles should be deprived of that designation.¹⁸

In general, the *nakazi* of all the *odnodvortsy* petitioned that their claim to gentry status be recognised.¹⁹

II

Many of the petty nobility did not enjoy a firm social position in the 18th century, primarily because of their poverty. Some sought military employment even after 1762 when they were freed from obligatory service. They needed service for the income and in not a few cases they would be satisfied with the pay of common soldiers. Such was the case of two hundred young men, sons of noblemen, who appeared at a gentry assembly in 1771 and declared that they 'eagerly desired to enter service'. Because of their poverty, however (and some had neither clothes nor shoes), they could not do so. The marshal of the nobility in that district (Pronsk), Tyutchev, wondered whether the Senate could have them enlisted as common soldiers, sent to a regiment and provided with pay, food and clothes. The Senate agreed and ordered similar treatment of like cases throughout the realm.²⁰ One can only speculate whether such individuals and their descendants managed to retain their gentry status.

There is evidence that some gentry families even became state

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 76-7.

¹⁷ *Sbornik*, IV (1869), pp. 155-6.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 160-1.

¹⁹ Another example of new *odnodvortsy* is interesting as it regards Paul I. At the end of 1800 he granted to all the lower ranks in the guards regiments, whether serving or retired, the rank of *odnodvortsy* along with fifteen *desyatins* of land for each male member of their families and a hundred roubles upon acquisition of the land. (*PSZ*, XXVI, No. 19,696.) Further legislation indicated that this was not widely accepted by those concerned. (See *PSZ*, XXVII, No. 20,242 and XXXI, No. 24,411.)

²⁰ *PSZ*, XIX, No. 13,743.

peasants as well as *odnodvortsy*. In 1731 a law instructed former *gorodovyye dvoryany*, who were then state peasants, to enrol in some new regiments in the region of the upper Donets. They were to be joined by some landless *odnodvortsy*.²¹

It was in the early years of the century, during Peter I's reign, that perhaps the largest number of nobles became *odnodvortsy*. Semevsky noted that some of the former *deti boyarskiye* entered the ranks of the gentry but that the majority were either unwilling or unable to render the obligatory service of a nobleman and entered the ranks of the *odnodvortsy*.²² M. Yablochkov likewise mentioned that some nobles preferred to be registered for the soul tax and exchange their noble status for that of a tax-paying person. A number of them even became peasants.²³ Some impoverished nobles likewise became *odnodvortsy* through carelessness and error.²⁴

Even earlier, in 1714, nobles were changing their status as a result of Peter's law which ordered that landed property be bequeathed to a single heir. The sons who did not get the family estate were called cadets, and were not obliged to serve, although they could if they wished. Many became merchants, peasants and clerics as well as *odnodvortsy*.²⁵ The law itself referred to the *odnodvortsy*. Through the constant partitioning of estates, it reads, nobles were being 'brought to such poverty that they find themselves with the *odnodvortsy*'.²⁶

The government was well aware of the presence of nobles among the *odnodvortsy*. In the revision of 1743 individuals 'who in the previous census had been registered with the *odnodvortsy* from the gentry and who present clear evidence of that are to be registered separately' (but still as *odnodvortsy*).²⁷ Another law (of 1762) referred to 'all Russian nobles, except the *odnodvortsy*'.²⁸ Legislation of 1804, which confirmed to the *odnodvortsy* the right to prove their gentry origins and regulated such claims, mentioned that 'not a few' persons had become *odnodvortsy* from gentry ranks, because they did not wish to continue in service. In 1798 the government recognised that in the reign of Peter I many nobles who had as many as a hundred or two hundred peasants evaded service by voluntarily having themselves enrolled with the *odnodvortsy*. It was supposed that the *odnodvortsy* peasants originated in that way.²⁹ (There were never more than 25,000 or 30,000 such peasants.)

²¹ *Ibid.*, VIII, No. 5673.

²² *Op. cit.*, p. 726.

²³ M. Yablochkov, *Istoriya dvoryanskago sosloviya v Rossii*, St Petersburg, 1876, pp. 372-3.

²⁴ *Ibid.* ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 379.

²⁶ *PSZ*, V, No. 2,789.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, XI, No. 8,836 (17); also XII, No. 9,000.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, XV, No. 11,444.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, XXV, No. 18,676.

Most nobles who became *odnodvortsy* did so in the first half of the 18th century or before. Towards the middle of the century noble status became more valuable and during the reign of Elizabeth, in 1746, the gentry were granted the exclusive right (with some exceptions, notably the *odnodvortsy*) to own serfs.³⁰ The government began to take measures favouring the gentry, and the most important of these was Peter III's law freeing the nobility from obligatory service in 1762. In 1785 Catherine II issued the Charter of the Nobility, confirming the privileged status of this class. Under such conditions, it is not remarkable that there was a greater inclination on the part of noble families, however poor, to retain their gentry status. It is likewise not surprising to find very serious efforts by the *odnodvortsy* to assert their claims to noble status. After 1762, if their claims were recognised, they could hold their personal landed property (although not their *pomest'ya*) without service obligations, and they would also be free of the soul tax.

III

Not only did the *odnodvortsy* become more concerned with attaining gentry status, but the nobles themselves began to express unease at the prospect of a further extension of their ranks. Many of them desired their privileges to be limited to those already noble and wanted entrée to gentry status through the Table of Ranks closed. The government was therefore obliged to take more active measures to control the acquisition of gentry status. This struggle is best studied in the *nakazi* and in the discussions of the Ulozheniye commission of the late 1760s.

The *nakaz* from the office of the Heraldmeister indicated that there was no established method of determining whether a family was noble or not. Records were almost non-existent in that regard and the question of whether a family's gentry status was based upon rank achieved in past service or upon an estate awarded for such service could not be answered.³¹ Subsequent legislation attempted to clarify this problem. In 1775, for example, the Senate ordered that the following information be submitted to support claims to gentry status: names of ancestors and their rank at least to the claimant's grandfather; whether gentry status was claimed from an *odnodvoret*s or a staff or junior officer; the presentation of any royal patents; whether the claimant had land and how it came to him; regarding *nedorosli*³² who were the sons of staff or junior officers, the

³⁰ Yablochkov, *op. cit.*, pp. 469–70.

³¹ *Sbornik*, XLIII (1885), pp. 137–45.

³² *Nedorosli* were children and young men who had not yet appeared for service for the first time. Some persons managed to evade service into middle age and thus legally remained *nedorosli*.

above information as it pertained to the father had to be presented.³³ Very similar instructions for determining gentry status were written into the Charter of the Nobility of 1785.

In the discussions of the Ulozheniye commission an important concern of noble deputies was the extension of gentry status to non-nobles through the Table of Ranks. 'It is well-known,' one said, 'that a thing loses its value as soon as wide use is made of it. Could gentry dignity retain the fullness of its lustre when its inherent authority is spread among many?'³⁴ Such was the tenor of opinion among those who would restrict admission to the noble class. Ivan Chaadayev distinguished between nobles of lineage and nobles of service. Many virtues were necessary to rise in rank, he said, and persons of common origin would be only industrious enough to gain rank and to avoid punishment. He implied that nobles of lineage possessed the required virtues from birth, while commoners displayed those good qualities only to advance themselves. People who rose so easily as officers, he continued, also had no means of maintaining themselves, which led to irregularities. Those persons were likewise the cause of numerous disputes over the boundaries of their small estates. (The *odnodvortsy* were notorious litigants in property suits.) Worst of all, he insisted, they were unable to educate their children properly because of their poverty, and that faulty upbringing could affect the morals of their offspring. Chaadayev then proposed that a legal distinction be made between the two nobilities and the rights of the nobles of lineage be set apart from those who gained gentry status through service.³⁵

Two other noblemen stated that since those who reached officer rank were provided with pensions or subsistence upon retirement, they should be satisfied with such a reward and not be given noble status.³⁶ Vasily Bibikov complained that, contrary to past legislation and regulations, non-nobles were becoming nobles.³⁷ Such a thing could only be justified in time of war, he said, when an especially large number of officers were required. He cited some laws to demonstrate that Peter I did not want non-nobles in service, and requested that an investigation be undertaken to establish who were 'true nobles'.³⁸ Prince Shcherbatov was likewise concerned about non-nobles in governmental service and the acquisition of gentry status through rank. He maintained that it was no longer necessary to

³³ *PSZ*, XX, No. 13,317.

³⁴ *Sbornik*, IV (1869), p. 190.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 153-4.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

³⁷ This concerned the practice of granting officer rank and gentry status to non-nobles by regimental commanders, which was according to law, but conflicted with another law that stipulated that only sovereign princes could confer gentry status. The essence of the dispute was the delegation of authority to regimental commanders.

³⁸ *Sbornik*, IV (1869), p. 148.

employ that device as an encouragement to serve, because the gentry already served.³⁹ Another noble deputy agreed with the views of Bibikov and Shcherbatov and said that they expressed the opinion of the entire gentry estate.⁴⁰

Mikhail Glazov believed that it was necessary to limit the ranks of sergeant and *vakhmistr* to nobles, because non-nobles would demand a pension at the end of their service which would be to the disadvantage of the government.⁴¹ In reply to this, Efim Fefilov, an *odnodvoretz*, stated that there were not enough nobles to fill all the officer and non-commissioned officer ranks.⁴² Another noble, after expressing the usual complaints on this subject, stated that it would be better to obstruct the advancement of non-nobles in service.⁴³ Shcherbatov declared that no more *raznochintsy* (non-nobles) should be permitted to become ennobled and that nobles should have preference in service.⁴⁴ Non-nobles, he said, simply wanted to reach officer rank and noble status and then not go any further in service. They wanted to acquire an estate and to that end employed any means, leading them to all sorts of corruption.⁴⁵

A very clear expression of one aspect of the problem was contained in the nobles' *nakaz* from the district of Rostov. According to this document, non-nobles acquired gentry status through service and then purchased estates. Enriched by the money they had made in service, their purchasing of estates raised the price of land. Many nobles, however, who served and attained the rank of junior officer and then retired because of age were suffering in poverty.⁴⁶

The objections of the noble deputies in the Ulozheniye commission did not have any result and the right to acquire gentry status through service was confirmed by the Charter of the Nobility. In the years following the debate a large but indeterminable number of *odnodvortsy* entered the ranks of the gentry.

According to their service obligations, the *odnodvortsy* were required to spend fifteen years in the militia (later in the regular forces). They were not allowed to enter any other service, civil or military, or private employment; legislation in the past had specifically prohibited all but militia service. *Odnodvortsy*, nevertheless, often made their way into the regular forces in search of a living or advancement, and this is indicated by numerous laws against such practice. In 1782, for example, it was reported that a number of *odnodvortsy* were claiming gentry status and the law ordered that they should not enter military service voluntarily, which was per-

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 211-13.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 171-2.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 151-2.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 218-19.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 152-3.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 353-4.

mitted only to the nobility.⁴⁷ In the same year another law indicated that a number of *odnodvortsy* had entered military service and attained officer rank. As to the question whether they should pay the soul tax upon retirement, it was ordered that those who could present proof of officer rank (i.e. gentry status), and of any of their children being born while they held that rank, were free from the tax; otherwise they were obliged to pay.⁴⁸

Still another law of 1782 dealt with the question of the status of *odnodvortsy* who gained officer rank. Again, it was reported that 'many' *odnodvortsy* in the guise of noblemen entered military service and reached officer rank. The question was whether such persons should be recognised as nobles at the time of noble elections. The Senate replied that since *odnodvortsy* held land for militia service, they could not participate in gentry elections, because only noblemen who owned their own estates were permitted such participation. The Senate further ordered that *odnodvortsy* who posed as noblemen should be apprehended and dealt with as the law provided.⁴⁹ It should be noted that the Senate tacitly agreed that all those who attained officer rank, *odnodvortsy* or not, were to be considered noblemen, limited only so far as were other noblemen. Many *odnodvortsy* had land that was their own and not state land given for militia service. In such cases, an *odnodvoret* who attained officer rank and who owned an estate could participate in gentry elections. Similarly, an *odnodvoret* who rose to the rank of officer could not distil spirits unless he owned an estate, because a nobleman could distil only on his own land.⁵⁰

IV

During the reign of Alexander I the government finally regulated the status of the *odnodvortsy*. Throughout the reign attempts were made to remove from *odnodvortsy* status all those who could present proofs of gentry origins. In 1801 a law was issued instructing *odnodvortsy* and other tax-paying persons who had proofs of noble status to present such evidence immediately to the Heraldry office for examination.⁵¹ Persons whose claims to gentry status were based on ancestors who had lost their status through evasion of service or disgrace, however, were not to be given gentry rank.⁵²

The most fundamental law in this regard, one that systematised past legislation, was issued in 1816. According to this law *odnodvortsy* who claimed gentry status were to be given the opportunity to regain that rank. For that reason, voluntary enlistment in military

⁴⁷ *PSZ*, XXI, No. 15,500.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, No. 15,590.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, XXVI, No. 19,942.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, No. 15, 512.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, XXII, No. 15,918.

⁵² *Ibid.*, XXVIII, No. 21,560.

service was permitted to those persons of noble origins who could present sufficient evidence to their local gentry assembly in support of their claims. They had to show that they possessed land granted to their forefathers for service. If they did not have such property, they were obliged to indicate the manner in which it left the possession of their families. If they could show such proof, they were permitted to enter military service and after six years could attain officer rank; and with that rank they qualified for the rights of the nobility. If they did not reach officer rank on retirement they were to be treated as retired *odnodvortsy*, not nobles.⁵³ Although it was not stated, this provision was in violation of the Charter of the Nobility, according to which any person who proved his noble status was free to enjoy the privileges of the nobility and was not first required to enter military service *and* attain officer rank. The law caused some confusion and apparently any *odnodvoret*s who entered service was automatically advanced to officer, sometimes even before he completed six years' service.

In 1819 another law ordered that *odnodvortsy* should not be promoted to the rank of officer if they lacked qualifications, and that those unfit to be non-commissioned officers should not even enjoy that rank.⁵⁴ Further clarification (still in violation of the Charter of the Nobility) ordered that those *odnodvortsy* who had proved their gentry origins must enter service before they could enjoy that status. Those who failed to do so, and those unfit for service, had to return to their *odnodvortsy* status and return the certificate of noble origins that they received from the local assembly of the nobility, which was not to be returned if requested again.⁵⁵ The only indication of the number of persons who took advantage of this opportunity is contained in the stipulation of 1819 that no certificate was to be issued until after the recruitment levy, since the recruit obligation would be too heavy a burden if levied on a few where there should be many.⁵⁶

After Alexander's reign there was little further legislation concerning the status of *odnodvortsy*, with the exception of that for the former Polish *szlachta* who acquired the name of *odnodvortsy*, but whose position was different in both origin and status. In conclusion, it should be recognised that the *odnodvortsy* were more than a special kind of state peasantry. This class served a useful function in providing a place of refuge for many nobles who were unable or unwilling to fulfil their service obligations before 1762. After that date many of them attempted to regain the former status of their families and enjoy the privileges of the nobility.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, XXXIII, No. 26,579.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, XXVI, No. 27,741.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, XXXVI, No. 27,641.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*